the book market

Is Monographic Tyranny the Problem?

PHILIP LEWIS

LINDSAY WATERS'S "RESCUE TENURE FROM THE TYRANNY OF THE MONOGRAPH" IN THE 20 APRIL 2001 *CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION* complements his "Modest Proposal [. . .]" in *PMLA*. The longer *Chronicle* piece insistently deploys the concept of crisis that presided over a 1997 conference of humanities scholars, librarians, and editors, The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis (Case). According to Waters, the overproduction of monographs required of tenure candidates "conceals an identity crisis in the humanities that has been developing for the past thirty years [. . .]" (B7). "Above all," he avers, "the crisis of the monograph is a crisis in leadership" that implicates the university: "the problem of the humanities monograph is, *mutatis mutandis*, the problem of the university [. . .]," an institution "increasingly committed to business values" (B8). In this university in which "the humanities have grown to be beside the point," Waters submits, the increased stress on the tenure monograph during the eighties and nineties is the most evident symptom of an ill-conceived professionalization of the humanities.

Although I would dispense with the rhetoric of crisis, I concur with much of Waters's diagnosis and welcome his proposal in *PMLA* to shift the tenure standard from the monograph to essays in scholarly journals. He is right in asserting that too many mediocre, largely superfluous books are published and right in worrying that the proliferation of verbiage young scholars encounter—for example, at the MLA Annual Convention book exhibit—impels them to organize their professional commitments irrationally. It does so not merely by monopolizing their time but often, as Waters notes, by disallowing a trajectory that would carry a substantial, exacting project of research and writing through to full maturation. The numerous and familiar reservations occasioned by this structuring of the professorial career around the monograph required for tenure clearly warrant the kind of proposal Waters has advanced. My question, from the administrator's standpoint, is whether trying to implement it without a more comprehensive scheme for reform would make much more sense than simply allowing market and technological forces to run their course.

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"A Modest Proposal" suggests that "[w]e got to our present pass because tenure granting came to depend too much on the decisions of university presses" (316). In my experience, the tenure evaluation process does not shift the responsibility for assessment to university presses. My main worry about the tenure book or book-manuscript requirement and, more generally, about the early reckoning with tenure has to do with the integrity of serious scholarship and with (sub)field definition. Since the early seventies, graduate students in literature and history have faced increasing pressure to choose their special area and dissertation project on the basis of what they and their mentors know about the constricted job market. More recently this pressure has been compounded by the propensity of university presses, besieged by rising costs and falling markets, to favor books of modest length in modern periods or on broad topics. These forces in the academic book market aggravate the shaping of the disciplines to the advantage of larger fields and cross-disciplinary trends and at the expense of collectively elaborated long-term programs of scholarly inquiry.

Is this distortion of scholarly work and academic organization flatly deplorable? The issue is a complicated one. The evolving university has a multifaceted mission and serves diverse constituencies that influence its curriculum and its research activity. Furthermore, when adapting to needs and demands of the university's students and markets, conservatively structured disciplines may be pressed into worthwhile debate about their procedures and objectives. Nonetheless, for our profession the detrimental effects of the system we've put in place extend beyond the choices made by young academics seeking tenure; the faculty member's entire career and thus academia as a whole are affected. The competition among universities for the most productive and visible faculty members and the competition among a large number of presses mutually reinforce the systemic pressures that fuel the proliferation of books in the humanities. Since publication qua productivity underlies prestige for institutions as well as professional distinction and financial gain for individuals, the all-pervasive impetus to crank out more and more volumes, whatever their quality or use value, will be irresistible unless or until the market for academic books crashes.

I would say, then, that in the humanities and soft social sciences we got to the present pass Waters describes by allowing the university's system of knowledge production and dissemination to settle on book publication as the primary gauge it uses in measuring academic performance. If, as Waters suggests, the system's drive to massive publication forces editors to retreat from high standards for accepted manuscripts and inclines many authors to bypass the rigors of large-scale inquiry and sustained argument, it puts our profession at odds with essential values of scholarly inquiry we purport to uphold. Since the system has been self-sustaining and since it appears to be capable of adjusting gradually to the new realities in higher education (including the marginalization of the humanities), the illness has the traits we resignedly associate with institutional complicity or managed contradiction. As such, it is not a crisis. But the illness at issue is, I submit, the more serious, systemic problem of the university that Waters evokes in his *Chronicle* essay rather than the discrete tenure-book problem highlighted in his *PMLA* proposal.

Is the proposal to privilege the scholarly essay over the tenure monograph a commensurable treatment of this systemic problem, or should the leadership of academic organizations be advocating more radical measures? For at least three reasons, I doubt the efficacy of privileging essay writing over the monograph. The first stems from my perception of professional journals in the humanities. Their plight is all too similar to that of academic book publishing: we have too many, few of them are thriving, many older journals have lost their sense of identity and mission, many newer ones suffer from a dearth of institutional subscriptions and from inadequate support for beleaguered editors, and

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all are caught up in the same system of producing and disseminating knowledge that generates too many books for too few readers. Don't we, then, face an eventual shakedown in the spheres of both book and journal publication?

My second reason for skepticism about simply moving from a book standard to an articles standard is that it would not reckon with the homogenizing effects of the established professional system, which tends to override the burgeoning diversity and disparity of American higher education (for a superb overview, see Louis Menand's recent essay "College: The End of the Golden Age"). At Harvard, Waters deals with faculty colleagues whose departments have principled reasons for reserving most of their tenured appointments for scholars who work on complex topics needing extended treatment in books. What's reasonable for Harvard will obviously be inappropriate in a community college. The larger issue, then, is not so much whether the book requirement should be diluted everywhere as how a vast and diverse system with little central regulation can be restructured so as to induce colleges and universities to adopt appropriate, institution-specific criteria for granting tenure and for understanding the obligations of tenured faculty members. This is why Waters is right, in his *Chronicle* essay, to underscore the question of leadership. Can we look to professional organizations such as the MLA to take the lead in analyzing the system and proposing reorganizational measures, or should we expect interested foundations (Carnegie, Pew, Knight, et al.) or a federal commission to intervene?

My final reason for skepticism involves the advent of new technologies. At the 1997 conference on the scholarly monograph, many doubts were expressed about what proponents of electronic publishing have sometimes envisaged as the demise of the monograph and the decline of scholarly journals. The decade immediately ahead is likely to be one of experimentation during which printed books and journals will continue to play an important role. On the other hand, as the emergence of the digital library and of many Web-based journals shows, we have to rethink the dissemination of and the access to information and knowledge that in the past were largely confined to print media. Already in the sciences, the practice of placing drafts of papers in open electronic archives is enabling researchers from all over the planet to obtain attention and criticism for their work before final versions are submitted to refereed journals. New, more inclusive networks of intellectual dialogue are emerging as a result. Something akin to these open archives will surely emerge in the humanities. The new media will perhaps ease to some extent the problem faced by specialists who project limited audiences for their work. Development of the electronic alternative could set the stage for an increase in the value of works that eventually make it into print. For universities, the formidable problem ahead could well be an even greater proliferation of texts that are public and accessible, if not published—an electronic overabundance of texts that call for the kind of screening and evaluation the academic publishing industry, however unsatisfactorily, has heretofore carried out for us. The task of reckoning with the current system of higher education is already redoubtable; as the information revolution transforms academic publishing, the challenges will multiply.

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